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ABSTRACT

Museums are undergoing changes as institutions which may cause them to adopt a more community and social mission oriented course of programs in addition to their traditional roles of scholarship and preservation of important artifacts. This change, coupled with the fact that museum visitation is a highly social activity, raises some interesting possibilities for evaluation of learning in non-traditional environments. It also calls for an emphasis on the social learning basis behind the use of institutions like museums. To facilitate the awareness of these social learning potentials more information is needed on museums as institutions: how they reach and develop their audiences, the social nature of museum visiting, and socially based learning criteria for museum settings. In addition, innovative strategies in evaluation and some kind of theoretical framework are needed. (Author)

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SOCIAL LEARNING POTENTIALS OF MUSEUMS

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The museum's purpose is to display objects not simply as selected examples of its holdings but to show them in the service of ideas. Museums increasingly address their exhibits to the social character of communication and to the needs and service of the viewers. Taylor, 1968

The museum is a very important interface between the intellectual and the folk. It represents a constant message from those who hold developed images of the world to those who hold less developed images. Museums around the world, therefore, represent a highly strategic network of information processing and distributing centers by which developed images of the world can be spread. Boulding, 1966

Exhibits of contemporary poverty displayed by museum methods in a museum setting may also, quite possibly, have only the effect of making the terrible conditions appear less terrifying. By making them seem more impersonal, we may destroy their impact. Before being carried away by our indignant sympathies we must be quite certain that our aid will help the cause and not hinder its advancement. For this we need some very sophisticated research into the emotional qualities of the museum ambience. Parr, 1969

Somehow, the Denver cab driver didn't seem like the museum-going type. Perhaps that's what made it a little surprising when he began to comment on the new art museum as we rode by. It seems his daughter was an art major in college and he had taken his family to the art museum over the years. He then volunteered that his favorite museum was the Denver Natural History museum and he proceeded to comment on specific exhibits he liked best. Taxi drivers can be a source of information about local museums and often include a critical review of current exhibits without charge. Washington, D.C. area cabbies can be counted on to advise on things to see at the Smithsonian and to give their opinions of new exhibits if one asks a few questions of them. This informal guide service may or may not be appreciated by those responsible for administering museums and their public relations. However, it serves as one example of the audience reached by museums -- an audience segment not usually represented in the more typical descriptions of museum visitors as persons of higher socio-economic standing.

Because museums have surveyed their audience with a rather haphazard collection of usually one-shot efforts, it is questionable whether the real composition of visitor populations is known. Of less question is the fact that contemporary pressures on institu-

tions to show accountability to society has stimulated some museums to look into ways of expanding their audiences. Correlated with this move towards a wider range of visitor groups has been the undertaking of community or social oriented programs. Large museums may develop satellite branches in urban impacted areas, or prepare special activities for disadvantaged children. A local museum may take over the art classes for patients of a nearby mental hospital or create a volunteer help program centered around retirees. Activities such as these clearly emphasize a social or community orientation in museum programs.

If the cab drivers' interest in museums reflects the need to understand the full range of people who visit museums there is also the need to be sensitive to the social nature of museum and exhibition visitation. In a study on the influence of a government exhibition in India on visitors, Bose (1963) concluded that literates gained more from the exhibition than illiterates. Considering that the exhibition was prepared for visitors who could read, his finding is not very surprising. Why would people, who cannot read, bother at all to attend a government exhibit designed for the better educated? The answer is that over half of the illiterates saw the exhibit as an opportunity for social intercourse. Not a single literate male (only males were sampled) indicated this as a reason. After all, as Bose notes, social interaction must be classified as a "light-

er frame of mind" when given as a reason for attending an important government exhibition. There often is a prevailing feeling that learning of educational material can't be mixed with a socially rewarding activity. To a great extent museums present a dissonant situation if they are viewed both as educational institutions and as a leisure activity. However, over the years, visitor surveys consistently reveal that for the larger share of visitors a trip to the museum is usually suggested by someone they know and undertaken with at least one other person. Many visitors are brought to the museum by someone or as a member of a formal or informal tour. Furthermore, the museum visit may occur as part of a larger social occasion, such as a family vacation, shopping and/or dinner trip or a break from work. Morris (1962), a sociologist, has even suggested that museum visiting must occur as a social activity and visitors can only appreciate the content of museums through sharing the experience with someone. Others, such as Cameron (1968) are of the opinion that museum attendance should be an individual activity to achieve the greatest gain. It may be of more importance to accept the fact that museum visitation is a social activity and ask how the growing community emphasis of museum programs and the social nature of going to museums can be combined to provide for a unique educational experience.

What kind of a social institution is a museum?

Not much has been written about museums as social institutions.

It seems commonly accepted that museums are somehow unique from schools, factories or hospitals. But precisely what constitutes that uniqueness? As museums move to define their social role in modern society and respond to pressures of institutional accountability, they need to review their institutional identity. One can understand the concern of a rather traditional museologist who questions the pressure to make the local museum some kind of community social center replete with all manner of citizen involvement activities.

Eisenbeis (1971) is one of the few researchers to approach visitor behavior from the institutional perspective. His work, which is fairly new, is focused on distinguishing museums from other cultural or leisure oriented organizations. Why does one choose to go to a movie over a zoo or a museum? What differences are there in the demands made upon the participant between museums and other cultural institutions? Also part of this research emphasis is the measurement of attitudes towards museums in relation to other institutions. Work of this nature is particularly important if, in fact, museums are in the process of changing some of their social functions and attempting to engage new audience groups.

<u>How can museums increase involvement of non-museum attending subgroups within society</u>?

If one looks through the abstracts on visitor research prepared

by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) there is a continual concern over involvement of new audience segments. The researchers clearly indicate different conclusions as to the feasibility of programs to involve subgroups within society that are not in the habit of using museums.

One of the most interesting social learning potentials of museums is to make their rich environment available to people from culturally limited backgrounds. A social psychology of contact between widely differing groups as applied to cultural institutions such as museums is needed.

The most natural way of increasing the range of museum audience is through the normal social influence that occurs as part of everyday life. It has been mentioned that people usually decide to go to the museum at the suggestion of someone else and/or with another person. Until opinion leaders within groups not currently using museums come to influence their associates, efforts at contact between museums and these groups are apt to fail. An illustration of this was provided the writer recently by the staff of a major museum. They reported that one side effect of their affirmative action efforts was increased attendance by minority persons. The minority staff hired by the museum brought their families and friends to see the museum and they in turn were bringing others.

Expanding the audience is not only a problem of bringing in new

groups but also learning more about those who already attend. Museum attendance figures often fail to distinguish between visits and visitors. If the pattern of repeat visitors is identified, their particular use of the museum can be studied in more detail. One specific example comes from work underway at the Smithsonian where we are discovering that regular visitors may have a number of interesting ways of enriching their museum visit. Some families keep very detailed logs of what they have seen and learned on their visit for use by their children in school assignments. Groups of school children may come back to the museum on different occasions and use exhibits as a reference source for assignments and papers.

Many museums, because of poor or non-existent audience measurement (see Cameron and Abbey, 1960) do not even know for sure how wide a geographic area they serve. These institutions cannot document very well whether they are neighborhood, city, state, regional, national or even international institutions. The tendency of local residents to bring visiting guests to the museum "as something to do" may expand the geographic range of museums. Years ago, Powell (1938) puzzled over the sudden increase of local visitors who came during the summer, normally a time for tourist visitors. He concluded that the increase was due to local residents wanting to get out of the heat. It was probably also due to residents bringing out of town guests to "their" museum, a highly social use of the museum.

How can the social process of a museum visit be better understood?

Ramsey (1971) has observed that groups attending the museum invariably pick a member to act as tour-leader. She also notices that tour-leaders, professional or otherwise, often interfere with the process of seeing the museum. Visiting a museum with someone involves a conflict between paying attention to others and the museum environment.

We also do not know very much about how visitors use space in museums, (even though deBorhegyi, 1963, anticipated this problem years ago), but their use of space is both a physical and social event. As museums have become more popular crowding in galleries has developed into a significant problem. For some museologists crowding is an unfortunate development. Others see it as a natural part of the museum setting. Again, crowding is another example of a social factor being part of museum use whether for better or worse. Future exhibits will need to be designed with optimal functioning under crowded conditions anticipated and built into the planning. In fact, one exhibit currently being planned intentionally uses crowding as an effect by moving visitors into zones of decreasing space to illustrate the world's population explosion.

Learning systems might be applied to the need for groups, such as families, to organize their visit in such rich environments as those of museums. It would be interesting to see an investigator

such as Screven (1973), design a portable system that would help a family both organize and handle their tour as well as increase comprehension of exhibit material.

What kinds of socially based learning criteria for the museum setting can be made more explicit?

Boulding (1966) gives a broad challenge to museums as the propagators of developed images but provides little specific suggestion as to how this is done.

One possibility is to carefully augment period rooms and other environmental style exhibits with interpretive aids that are unobtrusive and emphasize the social history behind the artifacts as recreated environments. Period room exhibits may be the most underused portions of the museum, yet one of the richest in their potential for stimulating imagery and impressions.

Again, a learning system application could be used to supply the social history dimensions to artifacts and displays. Such systems should emphasize both the social use and background of artifacts as used in their day, and contemporary counterparts or practices. Social history and current applications give extremely important cues for meaning to allow visitors to deal with objects of which they have very little direct knowledge.

Still other socially based exhibit criteria could be made possible

by the use of computers in exhibits. Simulations of complex social issues or problems could be presented and visitors encouraged to participate and test themselves in the exhibit (see Lee, 1968). Exhibits may also be made to simulate social interaction between visitor and artist, etc. via video-tape recordings. Visitors can ask questions and an attendant picks the most appropriate recorded answer to play back. Some exhibits of this type are being tried, and it will be interesting to see how visitors react to them.

What evaluation methods will work best to measure social learning in museums?

Parr (1969) has warned that exhibits designed to increase awareness of social problems may have unintended effects. His warning seems to have gone unheeded judging from the tendency to produce social problem exhibits without any evaluation research provided.

Anderson (1968) gives a general overview of problems encountered in evaluating the educational merit of programs in non-traditional settings and Shettel (1966, 1973) and Reed (1957) have called attention to methodological difficulties encountered in measuring attitude change in exhibit settings and the need for criteria of exhibit effectiveness. Both stress the use of innovative measurement techniques to assess impressions made to exhibit materials under conditions of short term exposure.

There may also be examples of unintended social learning in exhibits

not designed primarily around social issues. Cooley and Piper (1968) tested their subjects for prejudice in responses to an African art exhibit. Their study also raises the question of whether exhibits communicate prejudice toward certain peoples, ideas, period of history, etc., without such communication ever being intended.

The growth of environmental psychology and the current trend towards field experimentation in social psychology may combine to produce new research strategies. Robinson (1928) years ago advocated simple experimental manipulation of museum environments as a way of assessing their educational value. Robinson's concepts of experimentation may not be much different from Weick's suggestion, in the Handbook of Social Psychology, of using "tempered naturalness" manipulations in field research. Manipulations of this kind would be within the range of natural changes or modifications of the environment rather than highly artificial laboratory kinds of changes. A museum is rich in "tempered naturalness" possibilities.

From the environmental psychology side, measurement strategies such as the multi-dimensional scales of Kimmel and Maves (1972) may provide for ways of assessing reactions to subtle differences in environmental properties. Bechtel (1967) has developed a floor grid measurement device which can allow for unobtrusive monitoring of exploratory behavior in galleries. Research developments like these may bring about major new methodological tools for museum visitor research.

In search of a theory of museum behavior.

There is little theoretical work available that tries to integrate what is known about museum behavior. Melton (1935) produced a number of generalizations about visitor movement and attention span in exhibit halls. Weiss and Boutourline (1962) provide a start at a model of crowd flow in exhibition settings. Both Nahemow (1971) and Ramsey (1971) undertake efforts at theoretical structures for explaining visitor use of museum space. To date, however, no really definitive effort at a theory or model of visitor behavior in museums is available.

As a project for a seminar in the social psychology of unique environments at Colorado State University the class is reviewing some of the early papers of Kurt Lewin and attempting to think of concepts from field theory, such as conflict, locomotion, freedom, and valence in the much more operational terms of visitors moving through a museum exhibit. Data base for this exercise is drawn from past visitor research.

In another exercise in theory development the class is examining the assumptions of Proshansky, Ihelson and Rivlin of the New York City University program in environmental psychology about the influence of physical environment on behavior. Their work was based on an analysis of spacial use of psychiatric wards. As an example, the definitions of freedom and movement both by Lewin and Proshansky

et al provides one specific challenge. Many museologists talk of leaving decisions of where to go and what to see up to the visitor as an important factor in the museum as a free or open environment. But is the absence of any orientation really freedom? Or does freedom involve imposing some structure on the visitor? Neither of these exercises may be profitable, but eventually some theoretical effort must evolve to guide museum behavior research.

In summary, museums are undergoing changes as institutions which may cause them to adopt a more community and social mission oriented course of programs in addition to their traditional roles of scholarship and preservation of important artifacts. This change, coupled with the fact that museum visitation is a highly social activity raises some interesting possibilities for evaluation of learning in non-traditional environments. But it also calls for an emphasis on the social learning basis behind the use of institutions like museums. To facilitate the awareness of these social learning potentials we will need to know more about museums as institutions, how they reach and develop their audiences, the social nature of museum visiting, and socially based learning criteria for museum settings. In addition, innovative strategies in evaluation and some kind of theoretical framework are called for.

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